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GRANT AND SHERMAN:

DEVELOPMENT OF A STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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Abstract

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I

The fact that so firm a friendship and mutual confidence exists between us is often referred to as the Great Cause of our success. At all events I do attach a vital importance to it and will continue my efforts to fulfill anything you may desire.¹

Sherman to Grant, July 1866

The relationship between Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman may be described as one of the most striking characteristics of the U.S. Civil War. It is clear that throughout history the ability of military commanders to cooperate toward achievement of a common goal has been at the very least contributory to success. But in the case of Grant and Sherman careful study of their Civil War relationship seems to reveal that it was one of the key factors in the North's eventual victory. It has even been said by a noted historian that, "the closeness of the spiritual partnership between Grant and Sherman...is half the secret of the last two years of the war."²

This paper attempts to examine the reasons Grant and Sherman were able to get along so well and determine where the basis may have been for such trust and unity of spirit between them. Since their relationship, although begun at the operational level, developed into a strategic one, it becomes even more important to understand its foundation. They became a winning combination, a successful team from their first association early in the war in the Western Theater, on through

the end of war and beyond it. Once Grant had first-hand knowledge of Sherman's effectiveness, Grant would consistently select Sherman for the tough assignments, the ones where leadership and success were crucial. Both men were singular in their devotion to the cause of winning the war and uniting the country once again. To do this they were willing to subordinate every other purpose to the objective of maintaining the Union. This is probably the key to their relationship and since they each saw in the other the attitude, selflessness, and singleness of purpose needed by the Union, they became drawn to each other as close associates and friends.

There are many characteristics that could describe this strategic military relationship. One of the best descriptive phrases would be "admiration of character." There are countless references throughout their correspondence during the war to noble conduct, aggressive spirit, dogged perseverance, patriotic duty, all qualities either or both men ascribed to the other. In addition, military skills are referred to often in their correspondence, telling us that both had a healthy appreciation for a fellow general officer who could successfully apply the military art and science needed to win the key battles and eventually the war. Grant thought Sherman to possess great judgment, consummate skill, capacity as a soldier, fiery energy, while Sherman felt Grant was superior in military judgment, always motivated by belief in victory, and possessed of outstanding initiative.

I will concentrate on developing three major themes that help to demonstrate why these two generals were able to find the support and encouragement each within the other that was instrumental in sustaining their professional drive to carry on during the great stress of war.

The first theme is one that shows time and again Grant expressing his great confidence in Sherman while Sherman in turn returned that confidence in the form of boundless loyalty. The second theme is one of mutual friendship expressed so many times by each and demonstrated most often by unselfishness. Finally, it is obvious that throughout the war Grant was always careful to give Sherman the credit time and again while in turn Sherman was consistent in expressing his appreciation for Grant. Graphically it might look like this:

<u>Grant</u>		<u>Sherman</u>
Confidence	-----	
	-----	Loyalty
Friendship	-----	Friendship
Unselfishness	-----	Unselfishness
Credit	-----	
	-----	Appreciation

II

Although they initially met when both were cadets at the Military Academy, Grant and Sherman did not develop an association until they were both assigned to the Western theater

under the command of General Henry W. Halleck near the early stages of the Civil War. Fate had worked to throw them together and the irony of their first joint effort is that Grant was junior to Sherman. While he was not subordinate in the sense of command relations, we might say Sherman was the supporting commander and Grant was the supported commander, to use the terminology of today's modern battlefield. This first event will be the starting point for developing the first theme.

Without taking the time to examine the tactical situation in Kentucky-Tennessee in the Spring of 1862, it is sufficient for us to know that Grant was on the move to assault Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River in Tennessee while Sherman, who was senior to him, was sending him supplies from Paducah, Kentucky. This was the first time the two would work together, albeit at some distance, but it set the tone for future operations. The most notable aspect of this particular action, aside from Grant's surprising and bold reduction of Fort Donelson, was Sherman's willingness to do whatever was required to assist Grant. It became typical of the way these two men would respond to each other as the war unfolded. It established in Grant's mind the basis for his confidence in Sherman for the rest of the war and even after.

As a result of his success at Fort Donelson and Fort Henry previous to that, Grant was promoted, so that at the battle of Shiloh he ranked Sherman. This, of course, was not of any

concern to Sherman, who believed in Grant as someone who could get things done. There could possibly be a case made for the view that Sherman was responsible in large measure for the prevention of a Union defeat at Shiloh. Certainly Grant demonstrated in his comments after the battle that Sherman was critical to the victory:

Although his troops were under fire for the first time, (Sherman), by his constant presence with them inspired a confidence in officers and men that enabled them to render services on that bloody battlefield worthy of the best veterans.³

He further states that during the battle he "never deemed it important to stay long with Sherman."⁴

Later in the war Sherman wrote to his wife that he was very much aware of how crucial he was to Grant. Instead of taking leave from the army to recover from the death of his son (the second to die during the war), Sherman wrote, "I would insist on rest were it not for Grant's confidence in me. As it is I must go on."⁵

Throughout their association in the West there are indications that Grant chose Sherman when he wanted a commander he could count on for a mission calling for an independent, capable officer in whom he could have unlimited confidence. By the time Grant was in the East with the Army of the Potomac, he expressed his firm belief that although many in Washington were nervous about Sherman's campaign to Atlanta, he himself never had a fear of the result.⁶ Of course not, this was Sherman, the

man Grant had counted on many times and who never let him down. As a matter of fact it was said by an observer at the Battle of Missionary Ridge outside Chattanooga, Tennessee, after hearing Grant affirm his certainty that Sherman would turn the battle around that, "Grant's confidence in Sherman had come to be unbounded. Under given conditions he knew precisely how far he could depend upon him."⁷

This tremendous faith in a subordinate did not come by chance. Sherman was responsible for enough success while campaigning with Grant to earn himself a position of such value that Grant would say in 1864, "I have always felt in Sherman...a confidence that I could feel in but few men."⁸

Before leaving the subject of confidence and moving on to Sherman's loyalty to Grant, it is interesting to note one prominent example of the confidence Sherman himself had in Grant. Sherman had a simple faith that Grant would do what was right. The situation was the surrender of General Joseph E. Johnston to Sherman where Sherman's terms were unacceptable to Washington. For some reason, in spite of his faithful and superior service throughout the war, at its end he was the target of unfair criticism and even vicious maligning. Stung though he was, he had the confidence in Grant that once Grant returned to Washington from his visit to Sherman the situation would be rectified and Grant would defend Sherman's honor.⁹

In spite of this example, the primary response to Grant's confidence in him resulted in Sherman demonstrating exceptional loyalty toward Grant. Many examples are available but one of the first involved the Vicksburg expedition. With Grant in charge and Sherman concerned that Lincoln might consider placing McClernand, a political general, over Grant, Sherman counseled Grant to get recommended strategies for the campaign from all his subordinate commanders, including McClernand, in order to protect himself from political intrigue. Although things worked out well in the end, the episode served to prove Sherman was willing to expend a good deal of effort to protect Grant, in spite of the fact that Sherman did not agree with Grant's plan for the campaign. Typical of Sherman's attitude toward Grant was his comment after expressing his reservation about Grant's plan. "It is my duty to back him (Grant)."¹⁰

Following the Vicksburg victory, later in 1863 Grant took a bad fall with his horse and was seriously injured. Unable to move from his bed, Grant was willing to allow Sherman to command but owing to the sense of loyalty he felt for his commander, Sherman declined on the basis that records would be confused. He rendered all assistance possible and insisted on everything being done in Grant's name. In effect, Sherman was in command with any credit to be attributed to Grant.¹¹

A good example of the sound rationale Sherman had for his loyalty was demonstrated by an episode involving a reporter

barred from serving with the army. When Grant was given authority to reinstate the newsman, who had maligned Sherman, Grant said, "General Sherman is one of the ablest soldiers and purest men in this country...my respect for General Sherman is such that in this case I must decline, unless General Sherman first gives his consent."¹² This kind of deference to his fellow comrade in arms was bound to elicit the highest form of allegiance.

As further evidence of his powerful sense of loyalty, Sherman was ready to decline promotion to lieutenant general since he thought it would cause difficulty in his professional relationship with Grant. Sherman received a letter from Grant indicating his support for Sherman and the pleasure Sherman's advancement would give Grant. Sherman's response gives us a clear picture of how he felt. "I am fully aware of your friendly feeling toward me," he confided, "and you may always depend on me as your steadfast supporter. Your wish is law and gospel to me, and such is the feeling that pervades my army."¹³

The same incident reflects Sherman's sense of why Grant deserved his unswerving support. It was not that Sherman observed in Grant phenomenal characteristics unusual in men of his profession. It was rather a case of appreciating the absence of self-interest, arrogance, and selfishness in anything Grant undertook. Sherman was not hesitant to tell his boss exactly how he felt. "I would rather have you in command than anybody else,"

he wrote to Grant, "for you are fair, honest, and have at heart the same purpose that should animate all."¹⁴

It is not difficult to see how the confidence of Grant in Sherman could have fed on the loyalty of Sherman to Grant and vice versa. It is one of the most obvious threads that runs through their letters and other correspondence during the war. It was so obvious to Grant that at the end of his career he could acknowledge Sherman as the most loyal friend he had during his military career.¹⁵

III

The second theme for this strategic relationship is one that is mutual in its direction. Friendship has to be a two-way street and it is a feature of the Grant-Sherman bond that is closely linked with their unselfishness toward each other. After the two had cooperated in the capture of Fort Donelson, they were once again serving together at the Battle of Shiloh, or Pittsburg Landing. Grant received some unfavorable press and a very serious slight from his immediate superior, General Halleck. Effectively "kicked upstairs" by Halleck to be his second in command, Grant was suffering a most understandable loss of morale. It did not help that his fellow generals seemed to ignore him, all that is except one. Sherman felt empathy for Grant probably because he too had been ostracized earlier in the war when some had branded him crazy.

Nonetheless Sherman was sufficiently alert and concerned about his friend to detect that Grant was about to leave the Army for home and possibly end his military career. For a number of reasons, from assessment of Grant's value to the Army to Sherman's sympathy for a fellow officer receiving unjust ostracism, Sherman took it upon himself to change Grant's mind, and was successful.¹⁶

This kind of concern was sure to be remembered by Grant, who wrote to Sherman's wife in 1862, "there is nothing he, or his friends for him, could ask that I would not do if it were in my power. It is to him...that I have gained the little credit awarded me, and that our cause has triumphed to the extent it has."¹⁷

Sherman for his part referring to himself "as an ardent friend of yours" warned Grant against flattery soon to come Grant's way due to the momentous Vicksburg victory.¹⁸

Grant reciprocated the sentiment in a letter to his wife by acknowledging, "In General Sherman the country has an able and gallant defender and your husband a true friend."¹⁹

We can draw the conclusion that this friendship was more than a contributory aspect in the success both men enjoyed during the war. But it is what brought about the friendship and mutual respect that is instructive. Each saw in the other those traits

needed to be a successful military commander and each admired, respected and may even have envied the other's abilities. For example, Sherman consistently mentioned his pleasure with Grant's perseverance. He complimented Grant on his "reputation for perseverance and pluck."²⁰ He knew Grant would "make the fur fly" in Virginia. Grant had "all the tenacity of a Scotch terrier...he will accomplish his whole purpose."²¹ Sherman observed Grant's marvelous self-control and his ability to control others.²²

Grant saw in Sherman qualities he believed were essential for independent command where initiative and freedom of action would be required. He consistently demonstrated his reliance on Sherman's judgment and skill, most notably in his mission-type orders to Sherman. In November 1863 he informed Sherman, "I leave this matter to you, knowing that you will do better acting upon your discretion than you could trammelled with instructions."²³ Again in April 1864 he wrote, "I do not propose to lay down for you a plan of campaign, but simply to lay down the work it is desirable to have done, and leave you free to execute it in your own way."²⁴ After the Savannah campaign Grant confided in Sherman, "I would not feel the same security, in fact would not have entrusted the expedition to any other living commander."²⁵ We would not really need much more documentation other than to note that Grant after the war could say, "Sherman is so fine an officer, and possessed of such fine judgment."²⁶

There is one other conspicuous quality Grant saw in Sherman that he valued highly. Sherman was always perfectly subordinate and obedient. If it were not so obvious we would need only to listen to Sherman himself who said to Grant, "Your orders and wishes shall be to me the law..."²⁷ and "from me you shall have thorough and hearty cooperation,"²⁸ and finally, "Whatever plan (Grant) may adopt will receive from me the same zealous cooperation and energetic support as though conceived by myself."²⁹ It's no wonder Grant thought Sherman was himself worth a tremendous amount of combat power, more than a full brigade.³⁰

This intense and valuable friendship was not only nourished by respect for each other's abilities, but was cemented by words and deeds of unselfishness. Each was willing to defer to the other whether discussing campaign results with reporters or writing home with unofficial reports of battles fought and won. There was never the slightest thought of omitting the other when laurels were being handed out. Quite the contrary, both generals were eager to praise the other every chance they got.

A perfect example of unselfishness is the feint Grant suggested to Sherman in April 1863 at Haines' Bluff. Although previously repulsed in that vicinity and despite Grant's offer to forego the feint lest people suggest Sherman had experienced a second failure, Sherman refused to consider his personal reputation ahead of the good of the campaign. He conducted the

feint quite successfully and thought nothing of it, not the least reason for which his friend had suggested it. Their exchange of letters illustrates this episode quite well.

To Sherman from Grant, April 27, 1863:

If you think it advisable, you may make a reconnaissance of Haines' Bluff. The effect of a heavy demonstration in that direction would be good, so far as the enemy are concerned, but I am loathe to order it, because it would be so hard to make our own troops understand that only a demonstration was intended, and our people at home would characterize it as a repulse. I therefore leave it to you whether to make such a demonstration.

To Grant from Sherman, April 28, 1863:

We will make as strong a demonstration as possible. The troops will all understand the purpose and will not be hurt by the repulse. The people of the country must find out the truth as they best can. It is none of their business. You are engaged in a hazardous enterprise and for good reason wish to divert attention. That is sufficient for me and it shall be done.³¹

In the case of Fort Donelson previously noted, Sherman not only provided reinforcements and supplies with great promptness but volunteered to be of any service he could even subordinating himself to Grant although Sherman was senior.³² Another classic example is the promotion of Grant and his elevation to command in Washington. Sherman knew he would be in line for inheriting the command in the West yet he counseled Grant not to go to Washington. In his famous letter to Grant he attempted to reason that the best course would be for Grant to accept his promotion but remain out West where the war could eventually be won.³³

Further examples of the unselfishness shown by these men toward each other are found in their correspondence concerning the prospect of Sherman's promotion to lieutenant general, the grade then held by Grant. Grant's comment to Sherman is a classic representation of his feeling about his friend. "No one would be more pleased at your advancement than I, and if you should be placed in my position, and I put subordinate, it would not change our personal relations in the least. I would make the same exertions to support you that you have ever done to support me."³⁴

Sherman, however, immediately responded to the idea of his own promotion by writing to both his brother, Senator John Sherman, and to Grant himself, emphatically declaring his intention to decline any such commission because it would create a rivalry with Grant. Somehow it is difficult to believe these two would have clashed over anything even had Sherman been promoted, but Sherman's character prevented him from allowing such a situation to develop. It is not at all surprising then to find Sherman ascribing to Grant what is obviously true of himself as well. After the Atlanta campaign, Grant sent his warm congratulations and Sherman could naturally reply, "I have always felt that you would take personally more pleasure in my success than in your own, and I reciprocate the feeling to the fullest extent."³⁵

Friendship founded on mutual unselfishness meant that each of these key leaders was the other's best supporter and most effective sponsor. Whether it was Grant calling on Sherman for the difficult assignments or Sherman producing the results that helped Grant achieve his success, they both acted as though promoting the reputation and welfare of the other would be to the best advantage of all concerned. As it was to turn out it really was the best thing for the country as a whole.

IV

The final theme is one that demonstrates how Grant on numerous occasions specifically singled out Sherman for credit by official report, personal correspondence, or in his memoirs. It is almost as if he intended to preserve for us the unimpeachable evidence that Sherman deserved all the glory it was possible for him to acquire. This flow of credit for his superb accomplishments was matched by Sherman with a clear indication of his appreciation and admiration of Grant. Grant's account of the battle of Shiloh included the glowing commendation of Sherman,

He held, with raw troops, the key point of the landing. It is no disparagement to any other officer to say that I do not believe there was another division commander on the field who had the skill and experience to have done it. To his individual efforts I am indebted for the success of that battle.³⁶

Even then Grant did not feel he had done justice to Sherman, and when summoned to Washington in March, 1864, Grant once again was lavish in his praise of Sherman and more than generous in his attribution of his success to Sherman. Grant's

letter to Sherman is remarkable for its sole purpose of informing Sherman that the promotion Grant was to receive should instead be given to Sherman. He wrote that while he had been eminently successful in the war, none felt more than he how much of this success was due to the energy and skill of those subordinate to him. He further credited Sherman with a large measure of the responsibility for his promotion to lieutenant general writing, "How far your execution...entitles you to the reward I am receiving you cannot know as well as I do." Sherman immediately responded with the most praise-worthy letter he probably ever wrote.

You do yourself injustice. You are now Washington's legitimate successor, and occupy a position of almost dangerous elevation; but if you can continue as heretofore to be yourself, simple, honest, and unpretending, you will enjoy through life the respect and love of friends, and the homage of millions of human beings who will award to you a large share for securing to them and their descendants a government of law and stability.

I believe you are as brave, patriotic, and just, as the great prototype Washington; as unselfish, kind-hearted, and honest as a man should be; but the chief characteristic in your nature is the simple faith in success you have always manifested, which I can liken to nothing else than the faith a Christian has in his Saviour.

This faith gave you victory at Shiloh and Vicksburg. Also, when you have completed your best preparations, you go into battle without hesitation, as at Chattanooga - no doubts, no reserve; and I tell you that it was this that made us act with confidence. I knew wherever I was that you thought of me, and if I got in a tight place you would come - if alive.³⁷

Such admiration is hard to equal.

It comes as no surprise when Grant would insist that Sherman was, "entitled to more credit than it usually falls to the lot of one man to earn." Sherman for his own part then demonstrated his own attitude by asserting he valued the association of his name with Grant's and all he wanted was to serve near or under Grant until peace came.³⁸

Again, on numerous occasions Grant asserted that "Sherman is entitled to the entire credit of the detailed plan of cutting loose from his base at Atlanta and marching to Savannah." He wanted there to be no dispute over who was to receive praise for whatever success such an innovative operation produced.³⁹

While Grant was busy tallying up the credit to Sherman's account, Sherman continued to document all the qualities he appreciated about Grant, usually stating it in somewhat grandiose terms but always letting us know he held his senior commander in high regard. To his wife he thanked God for Grant; to his brother he wrote, "Grant is as good a leader as we can find. He has honesty, simplicity of character, singleness of purpose, and...his genius will reconcile armies and attach the people."⁴⁰

Besides proclaiming Grant to be the most conspicuous figure of the time, at Grant's death Sherman said it would be a thousand years before Grant's character was fully appreciated. He expressed his admiration for Grant quite well when he said,

Grant is the greatest soldier of our time if not all time...he fixes in his mind what is the true objective and abandons all minor ones...he dismisses all possibility of defeat. He believes in himself and in victory...If his plan goes wrong he is never disconcerted but promptly devises a new one and is sure to win in the end.⁴¹

V

In analyzing the strategic relationship of Grant and Sherman many leadership traits are obvious, some more common to one than the other. We have seen that for Grant's professed confidence in Sherman, Sherman responded with faultless loyalty. This confidence in Sherman was certainly well-founded. Grant was observant of Sherman's passion for obedience to higher authority, his skill in his profession, and knew he could trust Sherman implicitly.

The second major theme in this relationship is the powerful friendship each man was aware of and each continued to cultivate and nurture throughout their careers. Each saw in the other the abilities and characteristics needed to be successful on the battlefield and each may have regarded those abilities as ones they themselves would have desired in greater measure. Grant was the recipient early in the war of Sherman's sympathy and understanding during a very depressing period for Grant after Shiloh. Grant observed Sherman's initiative and ability to operate using mission orders involving minimum guidance. He also recognized Sherman's worth by equating Sherman alone to be worth more than an entire brigade in combat power.

Sherman, on the other hand, saw in Grant things he admired - the self-control, the ability to hold his tongue, perseverance and tenacity, the knack for remaining unaffected by those around him or remaining resolute despite setbacks. Grant to Sherman was like a rock of consistency, he was always counted on by Sherman to be firm in his purpose.

There was a sincere effort throughout Grant's career to establish a clear documentation of credit for Sherman. It is as though he believed Sherman would never receive his due and as a devout and ardent friend Grant took it upon himself to insure credit was given so the world would take note. Sherman was never unappreciative of this effort, constantly telling Grant he did not give himself (Grant) credit and actually wishing Grant could be a bit more selfish about some of the glory.

This relationship is probably more complex in its foundation than most people realize. It would not be nearly so noteworthy, of course, but for the fact that it was a factor in the winning combination from a leadership standpoint in our nation's most crucial conflict. One could draw the conclusion that confidence must have a basis and loyalty needs an antecedent. Friendship is built on unselfishness and mutual deference. And when one great man can be willing to let all the credit possible go to someone else he has the highest regard for then it is no wonder he in turn is admired and appreciated for his selfless and valued leadership.

Grant and Sherman were the kind of team with which any organization could manufacture success. It is to their contribution during the Civil War that the United States owes a large debt of gratitude.

ENDNOTES

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6. Horace Porter, Campaigning With Grant, p. 360.

7. Sylvanus Cadwallader, Three Years With Grant, p. 153.

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21. Porter, pp. 290-291.

22. Cadwallader, p. 341.

23. William T. Sherman, The Memoirs of William T. Sherman, pp. 366-367.
24. Liddell Hart, p. 232.
25. Ulysses S. Grant, The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, Vol. 13, p. 129.
26. Ibid., Vol. 9, p. 396.
27. Ibid., Vol. 15, p. 74.
28. Sherman, p. 27.
29. Ibid., p. 316.
30. Ulysses S. Grant, The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, Vol. 7, p. 409.
31. Ibid., Vol. 8, pp. 130-131.
32. Henry Davenport Northrop, Life and Deeds of General Sherman, p. 134.
33. Lewis, p. 343.
34. Porter, p. 375.
35. Ibid., p. 286.
36. Northrop, p. 56.
37. Sherman, pp. 399-400.
38. Lewis, pp. 298-299.
39. Porter, p. 320.
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41. Lewis, p. 639.

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